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Don't Celebrate Just Yet

Jerry Guo

For Americans, the death of Osama Bin Laden was a satisfying emotional end to the story of the 21st century's most famous terrorist leader, but it has not made the United States safer in the short run or the long run. Bin Laden's death is an accomplishment to be celebrated, but in the short-term it has not ended the two wars America still fights, it has not destroyed the international terrorist networks that Bin Laden supported, and it has not reduced the threat of extremist terrorism that faces Americans at home and abroad. Bin Laden's death, rather, demonstrates America's prioritization of domestic security goals over international norms and laws, weakening its security in the long run. And the anger and political turmoil that now embroils Pakistan, along with the concurrent weakening of US-Pakistan relations, does little to help United States security.

What has changed with the death of Bin Laden? One way of thinking about how US security could be improved is to consider the number of attacks linked to Al-Qaeda and its allies, as well as their severity. It does not appear that Bin Laden's death has led to a decrease in attacks or a decrease in severity. Attacks on Afghani government targets have continued, including a brazen attack in early July 2011 that killed two dozen police officers, allegedly supported by fighters from Pakistan.¹²¹¹²² And throughout May and June 2011 militants in Pakistan launched attacks on government targets there, including an attack on a naval base that destroyed several US-supplied surveillance aircraft and shocked Pakistanis and Americans alike.¹²³ In the short-term, it does not appear that the ability of terrorist organizations to strike at sensitive targets has diminished.

While these attacks negatively impact United States security in a tangential way, it is possible that Americans could still be safer on net because Bin Laden was more active in planning attacks on the United States than against Afghanistan or Pakistan, meaning there would be little change in the frequency of attacks in that region after his death. Indeed, early reports after the raid on Abbottabad indicated that documents seized at Bin Laden's compound suggested that Bin Laden "played a direct role for years in plotting terror attacks," though they also noted "there was no evidence of a specific plot."¹²⁴ But long before his death, there was debate about how much influence Bin Laden had on directing attacks.¹²⁵ And when President George W. Bush was questioned at a press conference six months after the September 11th attacks, he stated, "I truly am not that concerned about him."¹²⁶ It will be difficult to ever know whether Bin Laden's death prevented a catastrophic attack against the United States, but the debate and evidence seem to point to the contrary.

¹²¹ Alissa J. Rubin, "Taliban Fighters Attack Afghan Police Posts," *New York Times*, July 6, 2011, accessed July 6, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/07/world/asia/07afghanistan.html>.

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¹²³ Mohammad Farooq and Chris Brummitt, "Pakistani troops retake naval base from militants," May 23, 2011, http://old.news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20110523/ap_on_re_as/as_pakistan.

¹²⁴ Mark Mazzetti and Scott Shane, "Bin Laden was active in planning attacks," May 6, 2011, http://www.boston.com/news/nation/washington/articles/2011/05/06/bin_laden_was_active_in_planning_attacks/.

¹²⁵ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Kyle Dabruzzi, "Is Al-Qaeda's Central Leadership Still Relevant?" *The Middle East Quarterly* 15 (Spring 2008): 27-36.

¹²⁶ "President Bush Holds Press Conference," White House Office of the Press Secretary press release, March 13, 2002, on White House website, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/03/20020313-8.html>, accessed July 6, 2011.

Perhaps Bin Laden's death has scared terrorist leaders, sending them a message that the United States will not rest in its hunt for justice, thereby deterring them from launching further attacks and stemming the flow of new recruits. It is an overstatement to say that deterrence is of no use when combating terrorist organizations. However, academic research has shown that there is a limit extent to which deterrence is effective against terrorist groups. Trager and Zagorcheva report that when "adequate resources are devoted to deterrence, traditional targeting of nonpolitical ends can sometimes deter critical elements of terrorist networks."¹²⁷ However, they note that resources should be focused on targeting financiers and preventing groups from working with one another for sustainable results. In fact, they argue that it is possible that trying to deter terrorist groups could lead to negative ends. The attempt to deter often fails to achieve political objectives and could "radicalize the whole movement or some splinter faction."¹²⁸ Further, the use of force like this could create common interests among groups that drive them to cooperate.

A message that the raid on Abbottabad did send to terrorist groups, and also the international community, is that the United States is still willing to take unilateral action in pursuit of political and military goals, even against allies. Plans for the operation were not disclosed to the Pakistani government until after it had been completed. This indicates a lack of respect for norms of territorial sovereignty. It also indicates a lack of willingness to support allies. Despite Pakistan's crucial support of United States military operations in Afghanistan for the last decade, the United States was willing to put such an important alliance at risk to pursue a single man. It is important to think about the message this sends to other US allies, particularly those who are weaker even relative to Pakistan, and the extent to which it damages US credibility for the future. While it could be argued that this was an extraordinary case requiring unusually unilateral action, the fact remains that the raid happened. It is conceivable that the US will continue to prosecute extraordinary cases in the future. Such actions provide fuel to the historical narrative that the United States pursues only its own interests without care for the rest of the world and they could, as Trager and Zagorcheva note, incite terrorism.

So far, the most visible effect of Bin Laden's death has been instability in Pakistan. A scan of newspaper headlines on most days would yield reports of attacks similar to the ones referenced above, such as two bombs that struck a market in Peshawar, killing 39 on June 11, 2011.¹²⁹ There are several separate issues here. First there is the issue of attacks on the Pakistani people and government. It is possible that such attacks could lead the Pakistani government to retrench from its obligations to the United States, whether that means denying land access to Afghanistan, no longer cooperating in drone strikes or the war against insurgents, or even openly supporting insurgent groups. Second, there is the issue of existing Pakistani support for insurgents. There have been allegations that Pakistan's military and intelligence services have supported militant groups, tipping them off on impending raids or even providing material support.¹³⁰ It is possible that Bin Laden's death has emboldened these factions to support militant groups even further. Given that militants were still being tipped off to US and Pakistani operations after Bin Laden's death, it seems that it did not have a major effect. If either of the two issues discussed are taken to their extreme, a

¹²⁷ Robert F. Trager and Dessimlava P. Zagorcheva, "Deterring Terrorism: It Can Be Done," *International Security* 30 (Winter 2005/06): 120.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹²⁹ "Pakistani Taliban deny twin blasts that killed 39," last modified June 11, 2011, <http://bit.ly/myL0aJ>.

¹³⁰ Griff Witte and Karen DeYoung, "Insurgents get away after U.S. tips to Pakistan," last modified June 11, 2011, <http://bit.ly/nSnqz8>.

government sympathetic to militants could emerge in Pakistan, which would clearly have negative implications for US security.

There are many such concerns with Pakistan and the effects of the raid, but a pressing issue in the short-term is the fallout with respect to US-Pakistan relations. For now, Pakistan tolerates US use of its territory for military actions, sometimes against its own people. And the United States tolerates occasional missteps by elements within Pakistan in support of the larger overall goal of combating terrorism. But the death of Bin Laden could create a permanent rift in US-Pakistan relations, as some US Senators have called for the US to no longer fund Pakistan's military and Pakistanis are outraged over violation of sovereignty. This is not to say that these problems did not exist already, but the immediate effect of the death of Bin Laden has been to amplify these problems and make it harder for all sides to act rationally and cooperate in the face of a common threat.

Osama Bin Laden's death was a military success. The men and women who planned and executed the mission deserve congratulations for what they accomplished. But Bin Laden's death did not make the United States more secure. It launched a series of retaliation attacks in Pakistan that have weakened the Pakistani government, relations between the United States and Pakistan, and incited greater violence against the United States and its allies. Some suggest that the elimination of Bin Laden will prevent more attacks against the United States. They fail to recognize that not only does Al-Qaeda still exist, but that there are a multitude of other groups with the same objectives. Missions like the one to eliminate Bin Laden are masterpieces of operational success, and similarly daring missions are probably carried out often. But individual missions, no matter how important the mission, will not make the United States more secure on their own. In the absence of a coordinated counter-terrorism strategy with partners abroad, they are at best a neutral factor and at worst they make the United States less secure.

About the Author

Jerry Guo is a Research Assistant in the Global Public Policy Academic Group at the Naval Postgraduate School. His research interests include the influence of culture on individual and organizational decision-making. He is pursuing an MA in Security Studies (Defense Decision-Making and Planning) from the National Security Affairs Department at the Naval Postgraduate School and holds a BA in Economics from Dartmouth College.